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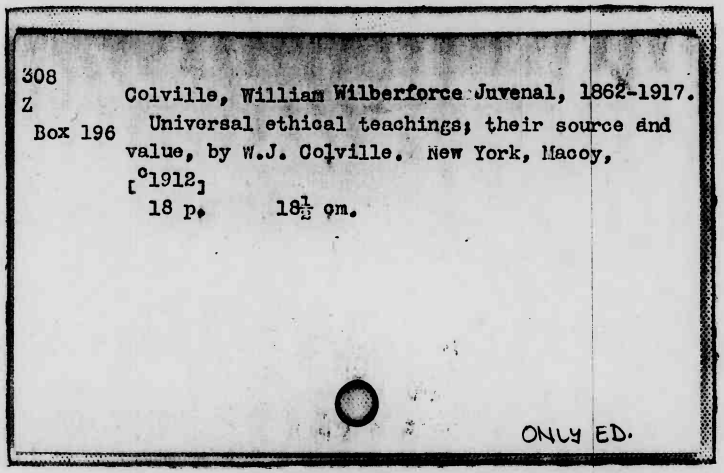
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# Universal Ethical Teachings Their Source and Value

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# Universal Ethical Teachings Their Source and Value

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# Universal Ethical Teachings; Their Source and Value

W. J. Colville

Having recently made an effort to trace, to some limited extent, the source and import of some of the cardinal doctrines of universal religion, common alike to the oldest and youngest faiths, we may now profitably turn our attention specifically to those distinctively ethical inculcations, which tho' generally associated with the promulgation of certain religious dogmas or doctrines, are nevertheless quite comprehensible apart from such definite connection. Religion and Morality are sometimes regarded as inseparable, and at other times looked upon as quite distinct, probably because some people can form no idea of a simple common-sense religion apart from doubtful theological dogmas, while to others morality may appear much as it did to Herbert Spencer, when he wrote his famous "Data of Ethics."

Referring again to Mrs. Besant's most illuminating "Universal Text Book of Religion and Morals," we find it divided into two distinct parts, procurable in separate volumes, the first part dealing with religion as we referred to it in our previous essay, the second part dealing exclusively with moral precepts apart from definite theology.

We have already discovered a virtual identity of religious concepts among all civilized races of mankind, and we shall

find it quite as easy to discover an equally universal standard of morality. As the claim seems well founded that all great systems of thought and practice owe their earthly origin to some great initiator, a man so far above the ordinary level of mankind as to be regarded by his special devotees as something more than simply human, or if, as in the case of Judaism and Mohamedanism, Moses and Mohamed are regarded by their respective followers simply as prophets of the Most High, the claim has been made in both instances that the Moral Code was a divine revelation, and, as such, necessarily binding upon mankind as an unalterable declaration of the Law of the Universe.

Between the orthodox and liberal elements in any religious camp there is always considerable division over the question of the divine or human origin of a moral code; but when we take a higher ground than that usually occupied by controversialists, we can afford to leave many questions open which it seems vain to endeavor to close.

It is claimed by the strictly orthodox in Israel that the Sinaitic Law, given in the Arabian Desert about 3,400 years ago, is an infallible revelation from Deity to humanity and therefore it can never be changed in any particular. From a purely rationalistic standpoint, it seems not impossible to arrive at almost the same conclusion so far as practical application is concerned, tho' a typical rationalist claims to know nothing of any divine revelation whatsoever. Here we approach the test of expediency, or the higher utility, which undertakes to test all alleged revelations by the fruit they bear when the doctrines they inculcate are carried out in actual practice. This is the Pragmatist attitude; one which appeals very strongly to many upright persons who feel very properly that our only means of actually proving anything must be the test of experience.



A lower use of the word "morality" makes a moral code a mere question of behavior, for it is contended that our English word "morals" is only a shortened form of the Latin *morales*, meaning manners. Between a concept of morality as divinely revealed and simply a question of desirable etiquette, dissertations on the foundation of a moral code can extend over a practically illimitable area, and somewhere between the two extremes, what is known as "conventional morality" occupies a convenient place. To be conventionally moral is not, however, to measure up to any very exalted ethical standard, for conventionality is never spiritual and is always concerned with conduct rather than motive. No one can possibly accuse the world's greatest Teachers of conventionality in the vulgar sense, tho' history and tradition unmistakably declare that they all conformed to accepted usages in so far as they could do so conscientiously, but not one step farther. and the course they individually pursued was the only one they recommended to their disciples.

"*Do as I say and also as I do*" is the substance of the teaching of a truly illumined Teacher, whose life and doctrine are always in complete accord. Lesser lights in the moral firmament may well say, "*Do as we say, but not as we do*," knowing that their lives fall short of their ideals. Between ideal and practical morality there must be an evident distinction, except in the case of one who is truly a Master, for only the Masters have grown to such heights of spiritual attainment as to live out to the full their spiritual perceptions.

Then, again, it is self-evident that we can see a height before we have climbed it, and as we are all growing or expanding entities, we make advances toward a supernal goal by admiring and contemplating eminences we have not yet reached, but toward which we are striving.

When Matthew Arnold declared conduct to be four-fifths of life he did not plainly tell his readers what he considered the remaining fifth to be. Probably the idea uppermost in Arnold's mind was that there is an unseen root whence all the branches of the tree of conduct proceed, and that we can only judge in external ways of behavior, leaving motive to the all-seeing eye of Deity.

With motives or intentions outward legislation cannot possibly have much to do, yet "intent to deceive" is a legal phrase, proving that juries and judges feel that they are able, to some extent, to discern and weigh motives and make allowance for weaknesses in cases where there seems to have been little, if any, wrong intent. Granting the righteousness of this attitude, we are, nevertheless, so insufficiently supplied with knowledge of what is taking place within the hearts and minds of others that outward laws have to be framed chiefly as regards conduct, tho' home training should always lay great stress on motive and on feeling.

It is inconceivable that wrong actions should have originally proceeded from kindly motives, tho' many actions seem to spring from simple carelessness or thoughtlessness, from which definite motive seems entirely absent. There can be no true morality designable in terms of pure negation, tho' we often, unfortunately, seem to characterize a moral life as one from which actual transgression is omitted, when we need to emphasize at all times, and particularly in the training of the young, the distinctively positive aspects of morality.

The great prophets of the ages have said, "This do and ye shall live," and "Go thou and do likewise," and they have given apparently no great praise to mere abstinence from actual vice. The parable of the ten Virgins,—five wise and five foolish—seems to lay great stress on the necessarily positive character of all virtues, reminding us that *virtus* is close of kin to *valor* in the Latin tongue, from which our English *virtue* is derived.



The extremely exalted morality of the great body of doctrine familiarly styled "The Sermon on the Mount" has led to many sharp criticisms, some critics going so far as to revile and ridicule it, and some even professing to find it immoral instead of superlatively moral. This depends very much upon the viewpoint and penetration (or lack thereof) manifested by the critic. Friedrich Nietsche, the brilliant but neurotic author of "Thus Spake Zarathustra," condemned in the strongest possible language all teaching that savored in his judgment of pandering to weakness, his arraignment of avowedly Christian ethics being based upon his supposition that the New Testament eulogized weakness and he could see no beauty apart from strength. Tolstoi, on the other hand, and none can doubt his strength of character as well as sincerity of motive, put in a vigorous plea for the full observance of the Gospel code of ethics, his indictment of popular Christianity being on the score of its having fallen so very far below the Gospel level.

As we compare the teachings attributed to the world's greatest Teachers, the one with the other, we shall find that they all taught from a spiritual basis far removed from any conventional or accepted standard. The writers of the New Testament often remind us that a Master knows the thoughts of those with whom he comes in contact and therefore views everything from its interior, rather than from its external side

Rev. John Watson, better known as "Ian Maclaren," preached splendidly on the story of the attitude of a Master toward a woman taken in the act of adultery, for he declared that the Christ could see in her the struggle of a soul reaching upward thro' darkness to light, and it was his privi-

lege and portion to help her to a nobler way of living. The men who would have had her stoned to death were, according to reasonable tradition, adulterers themselves, tho' outwardly very zealous for morality; therefore, when Jesus wrote in the sand at their feet the particular offense of each, man by man they skulked away and left the woman without an accuser. Then came the sublime opportunity for a Master to declare "I do not condemn you, but go and sin no more."

Condemnation is always the stock in trade of those who have something to conceal of which they are ashamed in their own lives, but power as well as disposition to actually raise the moral tone of a community is found only with those whose lives are exceptionally virtuous. Nothing is easier than commonplace retaliation, and nothing evinces less true self-respect and self-esteem than the paltry boast of "getting even." "If any one struck me a blow, I would strike him another," voices the conviction on the part of the speaker that he and his assailant are on exactly the same level; we can, therefore, understand it between brothers and schoolmates, tho' it is never admirable; but between teacher and pupil it is inconceivable without granting that the teacher is such in name and outward position only.

The great Teachers of humanity gather disciples around them whom they intend to send forth as evangelizing missionaries into the world which has not yet learned to live up to the moral standard which these missionary evangelists are to reveal and exemplify. There can be no valid reason for the work of teachers who only parrot forth what everyone in the communities thro' which they travel has already accepted and is prepared to live up (or down) to.

Regarding the ethical integrity of the Levitical Code, expressed in the oft-quoted words, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," much discussion and a good deal of needless controversy has arisen owing to misunderstanding both of the real meaning of the phrase and of the manner in which this injunction was carried out when Israel was a nation and the ecclesiastical courts administered justice. Surely no one whose instincts were higher than utterly barbaric could ever have undertaken to carry out the statement literally by actually taking eye for eye and tooth for tooth. The Courts of Justice in ancient Israel were accustomed to estimate comparative values and they exacted compensation as far as possible for those who had been wronged at the hands of their assailants. An eye would properly be valued as worth much more than a tooth, for if an eye had been rendered useless a workman's earning capacity would be greatly diminished. The injurer would be called upon to make an allowance out of his own income to help support the injured man and any family which might be dependent upon his industry.



In this interpretation of the law there was no cruelty and no unnecessary hardships inflicted on anyone; but had the law been set aside and the culprit simply pardoned, a gross injustice would have been done to the victim of the assault, and, moreover, encouragement would have been given to the violent and lawless to commit depredations with impunity. Between vindictive punishments and wise judicial penalties there is a chasm that no sophistry can bridge, because the former are utterly irreconcilable with the law of equity while the latter are its legitimate exponents.

Now we have reached the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, as commonly interpreted. It is said that Judaism calls for simple justice, while Christianity sues for mercy and pardon, and this view seems to have entered into the mind of the author of the "The Merchant of

Venice," wherein *Shylock* stands for Jew and *Portia* for Christian.

There is a seeming, rather than a real, divergence between the moral code of the Old Testament and that of the New, and even this seeming disparity quickly disappears when we lay sufficient stress on such words as "I am not come to destroy but to fulfil" and "Love is the fulfilling of the Law."

All teachings are susceptible of higher and lower applications. "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." We need to seek diligently until we find the real object of legislation, then we may be able to harmonize apparent contradictions. The spirit or intention of all benevolent legislation is the same throughout all lands and in all ages, but the methods in vogue for carrying the intention into effect differ widely in different lands and in the same country at different times.

Take, as a telling example, the question of Capital Punishment, strenuously advocated at one time and condemned at another time in the same country. We may readily believe that the more highly civilized a nation becomes the more it gives up barbaric usages, adopting milder measures in their place, but that admission does not call for any repudiation of the fact that those who still adhere to savage customs believe them necessary to the safety of society.

Those who justify the Death Penalty declare that their only reason for standing up for it is that they consider that it is the only effective deterent from the most violent forms of crime, and that were it abrogated, murders would multiply. Those who oppose taking "Life for life" declare the exact opposite and stoutly maintain that the execution of capital offenders has a most pernicious effect upon society, as it serves to stir up the most ferocious feelings possible in the human breast.



Now, whatever may be the view taken of the subject by any well-wisher to humanity, all must agree that it is only logical to advocate that course of action, whatever it may be, that we consider most conducive to general welfare. From our own particular standpoint, the only ethical procedure must be that which in our judgment discourages vice and promotes virtue. Our way of looking at a moral question evidences our moral growth and insight (or our lack thereof), but the ethical imperative resting upon us must ever be, in any set of circumstances, to so act as to bring about the greatest amount of good possible. We may be too dull of hearing to hear the spiritual voice clearly and too lacking in spiritual vision to see clearly the path which leads to the higher altitudes, but we must follow the noblest voice we hear, even tho' our hearing be imperfect, and allow ourselves to be guided by the brightest star which we discern in our moral firmament, even tho' it be not a very brilliant luminary.

Morality from the human side must be relative and progressive, tho' absolute and stationary from the Divine side. We are gradually discovering more and more of truth and we all need to sometimes make moral experiments, for in no other way does it seem possible that human evolution can be accomplished.

Those who insist that we have an infallible revelation and therefore all we have to do is to obey it, seem usually to forget that however infallible a revelation may be in itself, it can never be binding morally on any one who does not know or feel it to be infallible.

Mrs. Besant, in her Text Book, declares that there is a science of Morality, just as there is a science of Biology, of Astronomy and of Psychology, and she is without doubt well justified in further claiming that this Moral Science

has been consistently interpreted by all of the world's greatest Teachers, whose practical concurrence of statement on many fundamental points goes far to prove that they have all spoken from about the same height of spiritual perfection, only varying the form in which they have definitely applied universal principles to meet pressing demands of place and time.

Conduct among the Hindus has always occupied the center of the moral stage. The Mahabharata informs us that by good conduct we attain "fair fame, here and hereafter." From the same overflowing fountain of Oriental wisdom we receive also the following: "To give joy to another is righteousness; to give pain is sin. Let not any man do unto another any act that he wisheth not done to himself by others, knowing it to be painful to himself, and let him also purpose for another all that he wisheth for himself." These and several similar precepts scattered all thro' the Sacred Books of India, which are of much greater antiquity than the New Testament, prove conclusively that the Golden Rule did not originate with a Master who announced it only nineteen centuries ago; but this discovery in no way detracts from the value of the inculcations, it only testifies to their universality.

Zoroastrianism insists upon the supremacy of wisdom and purity as the pillars of morality, as the following quotation clearly manifests: "As thro' wisdom the world of righteousness is created, thro' wisdom every evil is subjugated and every good is perfected."

Buddhism insists most strongly upon living together in peace and amity, for it is universally maintained by Buddhists that their illustrious Founder placed philanthropy at the head of all virtues and invariably insisted that the road to blessedness or Nirvana was only a way of unselfish



devotion to good, the common good.

From one of the Suttas we gather that "so long as Brethren shall exercise themselves in the seven-fold or higher wisdom, that is to say, in mental activity, search after truth, energy, joy, peace, earnest contemplation and equanimity of mind, so long may the Brethren be expected not to decline but to prosper." Then, referring to the example set by certain tribes of peaceful animals, the teaching continues: "Since even animals can live together in mutual reverence, confidence and courtesy, much more so should you, O Brethren, let your light shine forth that you may be seen to dwell in like manner together."

One of the sublimest of the short pithy precepts in the Buddhist Scriptures, which show their spiritual identity with the Jewish and the Christian, is this: "With pure thoughts and fulness of love I will do unto others what I do for myself." Where is there any discoverable difference between the foregoing and the following, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke vl, 31).

Now let us hear a word from Islam. In the Sayings of Mohamed we encounter this version of the Golden Rule: "No man is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desireth for himself."

Mrs. Besant quite conclusively declares that all virtues take their rise in Love and all vices originate in Hate. But what can we say of these world-wide contradictories but that the latter is the perversion of the former. "GOD IS LOVE" is one of the most sublime and also widely accepted of all religious teachings, and it is surely demonstrable that Love is the creative force, while Hate is the destroying or disintegrating action of Love inverted. Were there no mistakes made by finite intelligencies in their endeavors to gradually

build an ideal world there would be no explanation forthcoming of the phenomena of vice, for we usually agree to call all habits vicious which have a destructive tendency, and we designate all practices virtuous which tend to build the social fabric and cause it to cohere. Virtues and vices must always be contradictory, working in diametrically opposite directions, therefore without a sense of right there could exist no sense of wrong, for our idea of wrong is of something opposed to what we conceive to be right, and with a tendency to subvert it.

The query is often raised as to how far we are each others' keepers, but before we can hope to answer such a question intelligently we must take well into account the many manifest inequalities in human development with which we are confronted at every turn. There are always seniors and juniors in the human family whom we may style superiors and inferiors in the sense that we can legitimately speak of higher and lower officers in any organization, always remembering that juniors become seniors and officers of inferior rank are promoted to superior grades. What appears very wrong at one stage in our moral development appeared quite innocent at some earlier period; that is why all the Sacred Books have their allegories of a forfeited Paradise and their legends of a bygone Golden Age. It was a state of infantile simplicity out of which we fell, therefore falling implies rising and *vice versa*. "To him that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, to him it (the negligence) is sin."

There can be only one sense in which a single standard of morality can be applied, and that is in accordance with the saying "to his own master he standeth or falleth." Rudyard Kipling has brought this out very finely in his heroic poem containing the famous line "And only the Master



shall praise us and only the Master shall blame."

It is true that Masters always lay down great fundamental rules of morality, but while these are fundamentally definite and essentially the same in all climes and ages, the nature of these rules is such that tho' they are extremely rigid, to the point even of absolute inflexibility, when considered as we may consider the spirit of the Golden Rule, they are extremely flexible so far as immediate external application goes.

Let us now proceed to apply the Golden Rule in some specific instance and see how best we can comply with it both in spirit and in letter. Some criticism has been provoked by the fact that arguments have been brought forward intended to prove that it would often be most inappropriate and annoying to certain others to treat them exactly as we should like to be treated ourselves, on account of our wide dissimilarity of tastes and inclinations. Other criticisms have been directed toward an imaginary higher standard of morality, "Do all for others," called by its admirers, The Diamond Rule. Both these criticisms are shallow and inconclusive.

The first would have some valid basis were we obliged to carry out the Golden Rule in every detail of external conduct, so as to insist upon providing certain peculiar varieties of food for guests because we happened to have a personal preference for them, thereby making the mistake sometimes of offering to our visitors the very edibles most unpleasant to their peculiar palates. But surely every person sensible enough to reason upon a world-embracing precept will realize quickly enough that its intention is to consult the feelings of others exactly to the same extent that we desire others to considers ours, which is the exact reverse of setting up one's own personal standard in all particulars and blindly forcing

others to conform to it or else go destitute.

The second criticism is plausible but unreal, because it assumes an impossible sort of Altruism when what is needed is a true Mutualism. We cannot leave ourselves entirely out of the human reckoning on the plea of doing all for others, because we are so inseparably bound up one with another in all life's manifold relationships that it is inevitable that because no one can possibly live to himself alone the manner of his living must affect others beside himself, therefore a spurious Altruism which would result in self-neglect, would be necessarily immoral, because it would reflect injury on others, while proper self-regard is truly moral as it tends to promote the general weal as well as one's simply private welfare. Philanthropy, meaning literally the love of humanity at large, must include a rightful measure of self-love, because the human race includes us as truly as it embraces any of our neighbors. It can only be affectation to disown all self-regard and pretend that we are exclusively concerned with others, but it may be sincere philanthropy which claims immeasurably greater interest in the common welfare than in the exclusive advantage to be gained by a single person, or even by just a few members of the human race.

Morality starts, as Swedenborg has truly declared, in a sense of proprium or selfhood; then neighborly affection dawns and we are no longer monopolized with our own concerns exclusively. At first it is self-regard alone, then mutual interest, that sways us, and we can readily perceive that the further we advance along the road of spiritual development the less we shall think of self and the more of others. "Neighbor" is a word of two-fold import, therefore it is always possible to advocate loving one's neighbor *as* oneself and also *better than* oneself. Paradoxical tho' this



statement must appear, it involves no contradiction in terms if we remember that "neighbor" is often used as a plural noun in place of "neighbors," just as we can say "hair" and "fish," instead of "hairs" and "fishes," for both are correct English.

An injunction to love any individual neighbor as yourself embodies the truest ethical teaching and let us couple with it "Love your neighbors collectively more than yourself." This doctrine carried into practical effect would cause no friction between duty to self and to neighbors, and as a moral standard nothing else should be advocated in public schools where young minds are being trained for the duties of enlightened citizenship.

The milder virtues, Compassion, Patience, and all the rest, are quite as necessary as those in the heroic group which includes Courage, Perseverance, and all others of the stalwart stamp, and it is indeed difficult to see how one can be entirely moral or healthy without perfect balance. It is equilibrium, not one-sidedness, that we require, and until this is universally admitted, carping criticism is certain to continue thro' lack of insight into the real difference between legitimate pairs of opposites and illegitimate contradictories. A well-balanced man or woman must have both a firm and a tender side, for it is sometimes necessary to turn the one and sometimes the other to the front, but no one can consistently advocate both justice and injustice, or kindness and cruelty, for these are contrary one to the other and mutually exclusive in self-evident degree.

From the Buddhist Scriptures we extract the following sublime declaration as a connecting link between this essay and the next, in which we desire to consider more explicitly the inter-action between Virtues and Vices, a topic which must be entered into thoughtfully and deeply before we can

reasonably hope to evolve a working system of moral teaching sufficiently sympathetic, as well as comprehensive, to serve as a bond of union between nations, instead of constituting cause for continual dissension. "He who bears ill-will to those who bear ill-will can never become pure; but he who feels no ill-will purifies those who hate. As hatred brings misery to mankind, the Sage knows no hate."

Here we have in simple synthesis the summary of all truly moral teaching, *viz.*, the dignified counsel to rise above the errors which defile the world by cultivating and radiating the virtues which ennoble it.


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